



## Judges Awarded for Exceptional Service to Bench and Community

Written for the Judicial News by Nancy Evans

### Judge Karen B. Flowers

Drugs and crime.

Too often in the criminal justice system, the two are linked like bread and butter. A drug abuser commits a crime to feed the habit and gets tossed in jail. After being released, the cycle begins again - drugs, crime, arrest and jail.

Starting a drug court in Lancaster County was an attempt to stop that revolving door from spinning, according to District Judge Karen Flowers.

Her work in helping to establish the drug court, which began operating in the summer of 2001, is one of the reasons Judge Flowers is being honored this year as the Distinguished Judge for Improvement of the Judiciary.

Flowers, 53, casts aside credit for launching the drug court, saying that Lancaster County Attorney Gary



*Judge Karen Flowers pauses for a moment with Chief Justice John V. Hendry after receiving her award of "Service to the Judiciary" in Omaha at the Judicial Dinner.*

Lacey and Public Defender Dennis Keefe and their staffs deserve as many thanks.

But as presiding judge at the time, Flowers became a driving force, putting in tireless hours to make the unique court a reality.

A private attorney for 20 years before being named to the bench in 1996 by then-Gov. Ben Nelson, Flowers said the drug court was a real opportunity to help non-violent offenders who probably would fail in probation and who didn't belong in jail - and wouldn't find any help there.

"I saw it as an opportunity to help some offenders stay out of the criminal justice system, hopefully, permanently," Flowers said.

"Drug court has a positive impact at every stage of the criminal justice

system," she said. "Obviously, if drug courts reduce recidivism, as studies show they do, there is a savings in the resources of the police, prosecutor, judiciary and corrections. For the individual participants, they have the opportunity to get clean and stay clean, avoid prison, get the felony dismissed and lead a law-abiding, productive life."

Flowers' other work in improving the judiciary includes:

- teaching the Domestic Relations section of the new judge orientation for juvenile, county and district judges since she joined the bench.

- serving as speaker and evaluator for judges' domestic relations education program in 1991 after county court was given concurrent jurisdiction over divorce matters.

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- helping direct a roundtable session on the death penalty for district judges.

- serving as past president of the Lincoln chapter of the American Inns of Court, past president of the Lincoln Bar Association and past chair of the Nebraska Bar Association's House of Delegates.

Flowers earned an undergraduate degree from Brandeis University in 1970 and a law degree from the University of Nebraska College of Law in 1976.

She said her volunteer work as a judicial educator helps her as much as it helps others. "Generally, I learn something while I'm there," Flowers said. "And it is useful to have to organize my own thoughts in order to communicate them to others."

Besides her volunteer work for the judiciary, Flowers served as president of the Lincoln Women's Municipal Golf Association this past year and served on the golf advisory committee of the park and recreation board of the City of Lincoln.

She also is a past board member of Leadership Lincoln, where she helped direct "Justice Day" activities. For her work, she was honored as the distinguished alumni by Leadership Lincoln and, in 1999, received the Distinguished Leadership Award from the National Association of Community Leadership.

Flowers said she thinks it is important for judges to be involved



*U.S. District Court Judge Lyle Strom, chairman of the National Mock Trial Competition in Omaha, joins in congratulating Judges Steinke and Cassel on their awards of "Service to the Community" for their participation in mock trials. Pictured from left are: Judge Strom, Chris Steinke, Judge Robert Steinke, Judge William Cassel, and Audrey Cassel.*

beyond their judicial activities. "It is easier to criticize the bench when it is seen as detached from the rest of everyday life," she said.

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## Judge William B. Cassel and Judge Robert R. Steinke

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It was a daunting task.

Last year, the Nebraska Bar Foundation hosted 1,000 people in Omaha for the 18th annual National High School Mock Trial Competition.

The logistics in bringing together that many eager high school students was enormous. Almost 400 judge "volunteers" were needed - volunteers who needed to be briefed on the task of presiding over mock trials involving high-school aged "prosecutors" and "defense lawyers."

Stepping up to the task of orienting the mock trial judges over all four rounds of the competition were two Nebraska judges who have long been involved in the mock trial program: District Judge William Cassel of Ainsworth and District Judge Robert Steinke of Columbus.

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For their work in helping stage, as well as judge, the national mock trial event in Omaha, and their commitment to the program over the years, Judges Cassel and Steinke are being honored this year as co-recipients of the Distinguished Judge for Service of the Community award. Each has previously been nominated for "Service to the Judiciary" award.

A district judge since 1992, Cassel, 47, has been a regional mock trial coordinator for 11 years. He coached Nebraska's winning team when they competed at nationals in 1998.

"It's one of the few programs the Bar has that brings the legal profession home to the public," said Cassel of the Bar Foundation-sponsored mock trial program.

"Youngsters involved usually are the best and brightest of Nebraska's students," he said. "They and their parents get exposure to judges and lawyers they wouldn't otherwise have. They learn first-hand the duties and responsibilities of the legal profession, and I think that's very important to the next generation."

Well known for setting up a Web site for his 8th Judicial District and providing a spreadsheet program via the Internet for use by judges and lawyers in calculating child support payments, Cassel was the first regional mock trial director to set up a Web site for that activity. The Web site allows students, teachers, attorneys and judges to quickly find dates and locations of competitions.

Cassel said his son, Ben, a computer science engineering graduate, helped him set up the site and made it simple enough that the judge can update it himself.

Cassel graduated from UNL with an accounting degree in 1977 and from the NU College of Law in 1979.

Named to the district court bench in 1991, Steinke, 48, has been a regional mock trial coordinator for 10 years.

He was co-coordinator for the task of recruiting the nearly 400 volunteer judges for the national mock trial competition, then, aided Judge Cassel in orienting the volunteers. Like Judge Cassel, Judge Steinke helped judge at the competition.

This year, Steinke is aiding the Nebraska Bar Foundation in hosting the state mock trial competition in Columbus.

"I enjoy working with talented young people who will be our future leaders," he said. "It's a great civics lesson and hands-on opportunity for young people to learn how the judicial branch operates."

Judge Steinke chairs the governmental and public relations committee of the Nebraska District Judges Association, and is a member of the Nebraska Minority and Justice Task Force and the Nebraska Supreme Court Committee on Practice and Procedure.

He's a former board member of the Legal Aid Society and served on the board of directors for the Columbus Area United Way from 1995 to 2000. Serving on the board allowed him to work with a variety of agencies in Columbus. "It gave me the opportunity to help provide assistance to those in need and to give something back to the community," he said.

Commenting in support of Judge Steinke's nomination for the award, Clerk Marlene Vetick said he has promoted judicial efficiency and has improved the image of the judiciary by his personal work ethic and demeanor. "Judge Steinke treats everyone who appears before him with dignity and respect. He has a high opinion of our judicial system and his conduct reflects that," she said.

Steinke earned an undergraduate degree in business administration from UNL in 1976 and a degree from the NU College of Law in 1979.

Cassel said he is grateful that so many judges and lawyers are willing to devote time to the mock trial program, and particularly to the national event held in 2001.

"Nebraska put on a first-class mock trial competition," he said. "We received very favorable comments." ♦